

## A Socio-Cultural And Linguistic Analysis Of Yemeni Arabic Personal Names

*Abdul Wahed Qasem Ghaleb Al-Zumor*

[wahed3@gmail.com](mailto:wahed3@gmail.com)

*King Khaled University, Abha*

*Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*

### Abstract

This study is an investigation in anthroponomy of a Yemeni community which may reflect the naming practices followed in some tribal regions of Yemen neighboring Saudi Arabia. The study aims at investigating personal names, particularly female names, as they look very striking to a person who does not know much about the culture of those regions. Almost 300 personal female names are collected by the researcher using questionnaire as the tool for data collection. The names are, then, classified into different categories on the basis of their sources. For instance, Saadah and the adjacent governorates (in Yemen) are famous for different weapons business, so, you can hear names like *tomateek*, *canadah*: types of gun or *qunbulah*: grenade). Such selection of names is indicative of the attitudes of the parents of the family and of the way they are associated with the nature and the atmosphere around them as suggested by the responses to the questionnaire. However, the changing social, political and linguistic influences on the land and the people of Saadah and the neighboring places (in Yemen) have left their impact on naming patterns. As a result, naming practices are changing. This study is a preliminary investigation in anthroponomy of the Yemeni community, to be precise in the north and north west part of the country. It is an attempt toward understanding anthroponomy as a branch of the science of Onomastics in the region in relation to sociolinguistics.

**Keywords:** anthroponomy, naming system, semantic analysis, sociolinguistic analysis.

### Introduction

Personal names occur in any language. They form a special group within the vocabulary of a language. They obey most phonological, morphological, syntactic, orthographic or semantic rules.

Naming is a specific linguistic act, intimately linked with values, traditions, hopes, fears and events in people's lives. Names reveal the many preferences of their owners (or givers) in terms of real life objects, actions, features and beliefs (Rosenhouse, 2002). Personal naming practices offer important insights into the patterns of social and cultural organisation of communities and can be a key to broader cultural changes. They tell us about the categorisation of the new-born infant (e.g. sex, social group) and the name-giver, and often tell us what is seen as significant about the background and the circumstances at the time of birth. In naming a new baby, and consciously choosing a

word to refer to a new person, that word has enormous symbolic power: it will identify the person, and at the same time the name can send a message, express a hope or prayer, perpetuate a cultural or religious tradition. (See Alford 1987: 51)

The study of personal names “anthroponomastics” is an interesting area of research that comes under Onomastics. Onomastics is a branch of semantics. It studies the etymology of proper names (Crystal, 1999). However, the topic of names is a multidisciplinary field that has occupied the attention of philosophers of language, anthropologists, linguists and ordinary people.

Personal names occur in any language and they basically change, develop, and die out, and they have a life cycle similar to that of the other lexical items of the language (Rosenhouse, 2002).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Under the umbrella of Onomastics there come two branches of research, anthroponomastics which deals with personal names and toponomastics devoted to the study of the names of places. Lexemes found in anthroponomastics bear witness to the values and ideas of the society concerned, revealing details about people’s origins and professions, tradition and fashion, social rank, etc. Anthroponomastic studies are based on the theory that there is a strong interface between a people’s language and their cultural practices. It mirrors on how language is used as cultural practices and how language is used as a powerful tool to view and understand the world view of a particular society. One can therefore use language as a microscopic lens to view and understand the social practices and day-to-day activities of a society.

Anthroponomastics can also be an aspect of linguistic anthropology, which uses general theoretical frames in specific socio-cultural contexts. Naming can be considered as a universal cultural practice. Every society in the world gives names as tags to its people. However, the interpretations attached to the names vary from society to society and from one culture to another.

The present study deals with the semantics, sociolinguistics and morphology of personal names in Yemen with particular reference to some common but strange names in some parts of the north and north west of the country.

### **Review of Literature**

A survey of the literature of anthroponomy suggests that a few studies have been conducted in this important area of research particularly Arabic personal names. For instance Sharma’s book (2005) titled “Panorama of Indian Anthroponomy” provides a list of the latest trends and fancies of the selection and coinage of names by different Indian castes, communities and regions. Koul (1995) argues that the study of personal

names in Kashmiri from linguistic point of view, though an interesting subject, poses various problems because personal names are closely related to the socio-cultural structure of people. It is therefore essential to understand the socio-cultural atmosphere of the people. Ogie (2002) investigates Edo personal names and argues that they are used to affirm certain aspects of Edo culture. The linguistic aspect of the study breaks names into its constituent morphological parts to reveal their meanings. To confirm the notion that personal names reflect important aspects of the culture of societies, Agyekum's study (2006) deals with naming as an important aspect of the Akan society and looks at Akan names within the pure linguistic anthropology. According to Agyekum, names are not arbitrary labels but socio-cultural tags that have socio-cultural functions and meanings. The study also discusses the typology of Akan names.

The studies found in the literature of Arabic personal names are mostly purely linguistic. They basically deal with the structure of Arab names in terms of *ism*, *kunya*, *nasab*, *laqab*, *nisba*, etc. For instance, Beeston's (1971) "Arabic Nomenclature", Auda's (2003) "Period Arabic Names and Naming Practices", Omer's (2006) "The typology of Arabic Proper Nouns" and, Zina Saadi (2006), "Behind the Name: Etymology of Arabic Names". Rosenhouse's study (2002) considers similarities and differences between names in Hebrew and Arabic from phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic perspectives. Mary Ann Walter (2002) deals with the meaning of names in Hadhramaut (Yemen). However, the study is not comprehensive and is based on very limited data. The above studies on Arabic anthroponomy show that this field of research, perhaps, has not received adequate attention from a sociolinguistic perspective in the Arabic context. The present study aims at contributing to filling this gap.

## Research Questions

The current paper aims at answering the following questions

1. What do female personal names in the north and north west of Yemen mean?
2. What are the socio-cultural and sociolinguistic implications of these names?
3. How are these names morphologically structured?

## Method

### Materials

The data under investigation are a set of almost 300 female names collected in two stages and from two different authentic sources. They represent female naming systems in four governorates in the north and north west of Yemen, namely Saadah, Al Jawf, Hajjah and Amran. The paper investigates some strange names which are common in these areas as well as some other parts of the country.

### Instrument

The anthroponomy of Saadah names and the neighbouring areas was first collected through a questionnaire. A set of questions was given to a group of university students at Saadah college. Some names were given and the informants who belong to different parts

of the governorate and the neighbouring areas were asked to give their comments. They were also requested to add some strange names that exist in the region to the list. At a later stage the collected names were used to frame another questionnaire which elicited information on the availability of names, the people's attitudes towards these naming patterns and the meanings or reasons behind name selection with the help of parents, grandparents and people who accepted to provide information on the reasons behind the selection of names under investigation.

To confirm the availability of the names elicited from the respondents more strongly, another tool of collecting the data was used. To be precise, another authentic source was used to collect the strange names, i.e., the records of Assalam Hospital which is the main medical centre in the region visited by almost 1,500 patients every day who belong to different parts of the country, mainly from Saadah, Amran, Al Jawf, and Hajjah and most of them are villagers.

### **Hypothesis**

It is assumed that the unique naming patterns that exist in the geographical area under investigation result from the socio-cultural background of the people. There has been a belief that personal names are arbitrary (Bach & Moran, 2008). In other words, there is no relationship between the name and its significance. This paper, however, argues that personal names are not arbitrary. They are based on socio-cultural and pragmatic contexts.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation of Results**

This section deals with the analysis of the names and the interpretation of the results of this analysis. The analysis is three-fold: semantic which explores the meanings of names, sociolinguistic which relates the meanings of names to the social and cultural background of the people under investigation, and morphological which deals with the gender distinction morpheme that is added to derive a feminine name out of the masculine one. The first part of the analysis takes the form of a typology or classification of the female names in the region based on their meanings. This part also covers the socio-cultural implication of name selection. The second part deals with the morphological analysis. The analysis considers both purely traditional and contemporary names.

#### **Typology of female names**

##### **1. Names associated with the agricultural environment and weather**

Names in this category reflect the agricultural environment in Saadah and the neighbouring areas. Saadah is considered one of the most important agricultural districts in Yemen. It is sometimes called "the garden of Yemen" as it is famous for growing different types of fruit and vegetables which are sold in Yemeni markets and exported to the neighbouring countries as well. The following examples represent names that belong to this category:

Nabatah            a plant in its early stage of growth

Kathiah	an aromatic plant
Qirfah	cardamom (a spice with flavour)
Himhimah	an aromatic palnt
Shatwah	refers to winter season
Lawzah	a dry fruit
Qootah	tomatoes( grows in big quantities in saadah)
Khareefah	harvesting season
Raa'yah	shepherdess (to congratulate someone on a new baby people say: <i>Mubarak al raaeyah</i> )
Sailah	a stream of water usually emerges during rain in mountains or valleys
Ghaithah	feminine form of ghaith (rain)
Zabeebah	raisin
Rabee'ah	the spring season
Baqlah	reddish
Zaitoonah	guava
'inabah	a grape
'ambah	papaya
Toffahah	an apple (Saadah is famous for its apple)
Shathabah	a plant with a nice smell
Hajwah	cloudy weather
Saboolah	a branch of maize or corn
Faakhah	a fruit
Heilah	cardamom
Matarah	rain
Qatah	qat masc.( a plant that Yemenis chew in the afternoon)
Jahrah	dry weather, no rain, no greenery
Shukullamah	a plant with beautiful flowers
Ghabrah	no rain and no greenery
'ithooq	branches of a tree
Firkisah	a peach
Nakhlah	palm tree

## 2. Names of some continents, countries and cities

The personal names that belong to this category encode the feelings of the namers. When a name is given after a city or a country, it reflects the feeling that the name giver likes this city or country or that the baby and the city, country or continent share some attributes like beauty. Following are examples that belong to this category: Barees "Paris", Qaherah "Cairo", Feefa, Qandahar, Doha, Tal Abeeb "Tel Aviv", Faransa "France", Surya "Syria", Lobnan "Lebanon", Amrika "America", Libya, Almania "Germany", Afghan, Aspania "Spain", Italia, Tunes "Tunisia", Qatar, Hend, Baghdaad, Imaaraat, and even names of continents such as Asia and Afriqia "Africa". The names "Qandahar" and Afghan were probably given during the American invasion of Afghanistan. People in Yemen are very responsive to the international events, particularly those which affect beliefs and Muslims all over the world. This point becomes clearer if a study on Yemeni toponymy is conducted.

### 3. Birthday names

This naming pattern marks the day on which a baby is born. For instance, the following names are quite common in the geographical area under investigation: *Khameesah* Thursday and “-ah” is the feminine morpheme *Jum’ah* Friday. The word itself is feminine.

*Sabtah Sabt* is Saturday and “-ah” is the feminine morpheme *Raboo’ah* Wednesday and “-ah” is the feminine morpheme. When a child is named “*Sabtah*” it indicates that she was born on Saturday and the same with the other day names. This pattern is mostly found in the rural areas because the options and sources of names are not as wide as in the urban areas. People depend more on the local environment, spatial or temporal to provide them with names to their babies.

### 4. Names indicating the issue number

A few names are found in the data which are given as indicators of the issue number, i.e. the order of the child in the series of issues. For instance the name “*thaniah*” indicates that the child order is the second; “*thalthah*” means the third; *khamsiah*” means the fifth, “*fathah*” means the first. The names “*khaatmah*, *Najah*, *Khatmah*, *Nihayah*” indicate that the parents have decided to stop producing children and that the baby given one of these names is the last issue.

### 5. Names associated with money amounts and currency

Human beings are inclined to love money and consider it as a dear property. Babies are also dear to their parents. Some parents show their love to their newly born off-springs through naming them after money vocabulary. The following examples appear in the data and they illustrate names in this category:

Doolar	dollar
Dirhamah	Dirham + feminine marker
Malayeen	millions
Malioon	million
Buqshah	a currency used sometime in the past history of Yemen
Oloof	thousands
Miliaar	Billion

### 6. Circumstantial names

There are certain names whose meanings record the circumstances surrounding the baby birth. They may relate to the place of birth, events taking place at birth time, the weather description at birth time, etc. The names under this category are grouped into

- a. anthro-toponyms
- b. temporonyms
- c. manner of birth
- d. death prevention and survival names

a. Anthro-toponyms

These are personal names that pertain to the place of birth of the baby. The two examples below illustrate this pattern:

Robah	a piece of land where delivery takes place when the mother is out of the house doing some work on the farm.
Sheihah	refers to the name of a tree and the name is given if birth takes place among these trees.

b. Tempronoms

The term is used for names that relate to the period of time when birth happens. Under this category various names can be identified which relate to periodic, social, economic or political atmosphere of the time. The following names are classified under this heading:

Wahdah	associated with the unification of the two parts of Yemen
Intikhab	associated with the election time
Harbiah	born during a war
Makhafah	born during fearful time
Mihnah	born during a misfortune
Ahdaath	born during certain important events
Ajwaal	born during a football match
Hukoomah	associated with the government
Istiqlaal	born on the independence day
Istishhaad	related to an event of martyrdom
Ittifaq	at a time of agreement or compromise after conflict
Ittihaad	unification (see above)
Jumhooriah	associated with the Republic regime
Hudnah	Truce (fighting is a common feature of the tribes in these districts)
Jahrah	drought
Sharee'ah	born at a time of conflict between the baby's family and another one
Sharqah	born at sunrise
Tal'ah	born at sunrise
Ghaithah	born during rain
Matarah	born during rain
Seilah	born during rain
Qailah	born at the siesta time
Feezah	came with visa to her father
'azaa'	born at a time of death mourning
Sabrah	born when the parents' situation is good.
Jeehan/Maqased	associated with some tribal rituals to resolve conflicts.
Eidah	born on Eid day.
Nashrah	'news', if the baby born at news time on T.V.
'askarah	feminine form of 'askar "soldiers"

c. Manner of birth names

Some names are chosen to depict the manner of birth. In most cases belonging to this category the name given is one word that briefly describes the process of delivery

particularly when it takes place with some difficulty or in an unexpected manner. Consider the following examples:

Faj'ah	when delivery took place out of a sudden.
Mubteyah	(slow), pregnancy lasted for longer period than usual.
Mut'ebah	(causing suffering), birth was not easy, the mother suffered during the process.
Mo'jilah	(in a hurry), pregnancy lasted for shorter period than usual.
'athaab	torture, i.e. born with difficulty.
Faltah/Bazgah	"if the mother had an easy and quick delivery"
Irhaaq	if delivery is difficult.

#### d. Death prevention and survival names

In some families babies are born, live for short time and then die. In such cases there is a common belief that if the name given to the baby is unpleasant, it will survive. In other cases if the child is very beautiful and the parents are afraid of the evil eye, they give bad names to the babies as follows:

Shoo'ah	ugly
Sho'yah	ugly
Bish'ah	very ugly
Kurheyah	causing hatred
Makroohah	not loved by others
Kheibah	ugly
Kurhah	ugliness

Such names are believed to prevent death of babies.

### **7. Brand and innovation names**

This class of female names refers to the names given after some famous brands and innovations that become famous during birth. The following names belong to this category:

Bonooz	plural of the word Benz ( a car brand).
Kahrabah/kahrab	'electricity'
Shareehah	a sim card
Nasan	a car brand(Nissan).
Toyota	a car brand
Arabsaat	an artificial satellite
Makeenah	a machine
Radiah	'means radio', the baby born when radio first came.
Tairah	associated with "plane"
Harbiah	'a fighting plane'

### **8. Feminine names derived from masculine names**

Names that belong to this category are very common. A gender marker morpheme is added to many masculine names to form a feminine one. This pattern is peculiar to



Saadah and the neighbouring areas. Many of these names are after the family or tribe name. The following list shows how derivation takes place:

<b><u>Male name</u></b>	<b><u>Female name</u></b>
Shaye'	Shay'ah
Hamood	Hamoodah
Hameed	Hameedah
Musfer	Musferah
Dhaif	Dhaifah
Julhum	Julhumah
Hazmal	Hazmalah
Naief	Naifah
Asbal	Asbalah
Aqlaan	Aqlanah
Feneis	Feneisah

### **9. Weapons names**

Saadah is famous for its weapons market where you can buy different types of weapons. Moreover, the government and people in Saadah have experienced big wars throughout history. In addition, a part of the people's uniform in many tribal areas is to wear a gun with a belt full of bullets or at least a pistol all the time when out. The reason is partly related to the customs of people and partly because of frequent tribal revenge wars which require people to be prepared for attack or defense at any time in any place. Such beliefs and circumstances are reflected in the names given to babies. The following names are associated with weapons:

Sharfa	a type of gun.
Tamateek	a type of gun.
Shumaizar	a type of gun.
Huwaizar	a type of gun.
Hasakah	one end of the bullet.
Zaghrah	a knife connected to a gun.
Shafrah	a knife.
Kanadah	a gun.
Qunbulah	a grenade.
Bazookah	Bazookah.
Qartalah	a container with 20 bullets.

### **10. Names depicting special physical and behavioural features at birth**

These names encode the physical and behavioural characteristics of the baby which unfold during the first week after delivery. Naming does not usually take place on the very first day of birth. Names are often given on or after the seventh day. Namers attitude towards the newborn baby forms during the first few days. The following list shows these attitudes:

Tharbah	the tail part of a sheep to indicate that the baby is healthy and has white complexion.
Shafrah	a very bright knife; if the child is fair in complexion.
Aleefah	calm and quiet.
Hamamah	'pigeon' indicating beauty and quietness.
Lambah	fluorescent light.
Sham'ah	candle.
Ghazalah	deer.
Hameesah	an adjective meaning someone is active.
Hawarah	'ginger'; if the baby is active.
Ghabasah	if the baby's eyes are small at birth time.
Qaleelah	if the baby is very smaller than the normal size and weight.
Bisbasah	means pepper, "if the baby looks clever."

### **11. Foreign Names**

The current generation seems to revolt against the traditional names under the influence of communication with other worlds through media, traveling, reading about the culture of other nations, etc. The following examples illustrate this trend: Zeezah, Diana, Boosy, Feefi, Filorinda, Christina, Leena, Lindah, Lucy, Reem, Sufia, Bulivia, to name but a few. These names can be found in remote rural areas let alone in the urban areas.

### **12. Miscellaneous**

This class includes sporadic names which can be classified under different categories which cannot form an independent category with enough examples. For instance Afwaj (may be associated with groups of pilgrims), Aqlam (pens), Aqwaal (sayings), Ahdaaf (aims), Burtukanah, Doctoorah, Mudeerah (manageress), Iqtisaad (economy), Irhaab (terrorism), Izdihaar (prosperity), Fikrah (an idea), Fiziaa (Physics), Hijrah, Hiwaiiah, Gumhooriyah, Makkah, 'ooloom (sciences), etc.

### **The Linguistic (morphological) Analysis**

A great number of Arabic nouns tend to inflect their feminine gender from masculine gender by adding the gender distinction marker (-ah), as in 'maktab /maktabah, mudarres/mudarresah, Haleem/Haleemah, Saeed/Saeedah, Ameen/Ameenah, etc. This is also true when we talk about Yemeni Arabic personal names particularly names of aged people and names of those who live in the rural areas which is reflected by the data under investigation. Names maintain their originality by adding the -ah morpheme such as Bahrah, Hasakah, Harbiah, Musfirah, Radiah, Saddamah, Askarah, Matarah, etc. In the urban areas, however, a new trend of naming patterns has been gradually emerging. The traditional Arabic gender marker (-ah) is gradually losing ground. A new version of names is taking its position under the pressure of modern technology, internet, media,

intercultural communication, etc. The following names illustrate the new generation of names: Sawsan, Safa, Diana, Muna, Awatef, Amal, Intisar, Sabah, Rozali, Lucy, Najlaa, Kholood, Tahani, Manal, Suzi, Sunia, Rahaf, Rabab, Rehab, Abeer, Yasmeeen, Iftikhar, Ashjan, Mayyasah, Ghadah, Ghadeer, Kwathar, Siham, Reem, Rima, Naseem, Bardees, etc.

## **Discussion**

The classification of names into various categories as presented above strongly supports the hypothesis that the choice of names is based on social and cultural considerations. Names are not arbitrary lexemes that have no meaning. Almost each name has a meaning. The above typology shows how social practices and beliefs influence the selection of personal names. The presentation of data shows that some sources of names are exclusively found in Saadah and some other northern and north western regions in Yemen; for example clan names and weapons names. Other categories like names associated with agriculture and weather may be generalized to cover many areas of Yemen with the same or similar geographical features.

Generally speaking, name givers while giving names are influenced by two types of factors: local and external. The local factors include weather names, agricultural names, circumstantial names, weapons names, and clan names. The external factors include the names of continents, countries and cities, foreign names and brand and innovations names. The linguistic analysis of Yemeni personal names shows that the traditional gender distinction marker is more common in the rural areas than in the urban areas because of the limited exposure to the outer world in villages and because of the limited sources people utilize to name their babies. In many cases, they derive the feminine names from the masculine ones, though they may not agree with Arabic grammatical and semantic rules.

## **Conclusions**

This study is a preliminary investigation in anthroponomy of the Yemeni community, to be precise in the north and north west part of the country. It is an attempt toward understanding anthroponomy as a branch of the science of Onomastics in the region in relation to sociolinguistics. Following are the major findings of the study which sum up the conclusions:

1. Naming systems belong to social and cultural systems in which they are embedded.
2. Naming systems offer indications on the type of social and cultural ethos within which they are used.
3. Naming systems reflect essential values and important traits in their respective social organization.
4. The regional dialect is one of the essential sources of names. Therefore, how the word sounds is not a criteria for judging the beauty of the name. The signifier may sound unpleasant but the original meaning of the word in the dialectal dictionary

- is very attractive. The beauty of the name has to be judged within the community of origin.
5. Names contain precious elements of information on the history of human groups.
  6. Names vary in their linguistic structure across generations which may lead to a conclusion that traditional Arabic names are at risk of extinction. The spread of foreign names specially in the developed areas may pose a threat to the cultural identity of Arabs, an argument that requires further inquiry to prove or disprove it.

### **Recommendations and Suggestions for Further Research**

The present study cannot cover the different aspects of anthroponomy. Further research in different aspects of the field of Arabic Onomastics is necessary to complete the picture. The following relevant topics are suggestions for further investigations in this area:

1. Investigating Onomastics as a wide area of research and studying its principal branches (anthroponomastics and toponomastics) in details, particularly in the Arabian Gulf which is more responsive to the world changes than any other countries in the Arab world. It is necessary to interpret the linguistic, social, cultural and political implications of naming patterns.
2. How personal names in the rural areas differ from personal names in the urban areas.
3. Is the traditional Arabic gender distinction marker really at risk?
4. Diachronic studies in Onomastics could be very interesting and may attract or may have attracted the attentions of many of the linguists preset at this conference.

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### **About the author**

Abdul Wahed Qasem Ghaleb Al-Zumor is an assistant professor of Linguistics, currently working in the Department of English, Faculty of Languages & Translation, King Khaled University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. His areas of interest include Interlanguage, Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis and Sociolinguistics. He had participated in international conferences in Malaysia, Jordan, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman.